

February 12, 2023

Esteemed members of the Human Services Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly,

My name is Chalise Ross and I am a resident of Farmington. I work for the West Hartford Public School system, and my testimony comes primarily from my experiences with children and their families in West Hartford who desperately need access to HUSKY. I stand strongly in support of HB 6616. Expanding access to HUSKY regardless of immigration status is essential to the lives of young CT residents. Without proper healthcare coverage, students are not able to attend school and focus on learning in the same way their neighbors are, which puts them at an even greater disadvantage than they already are as immigrants.

New immigrants prioritize the education of their children, but are often thwarted by the medical requirements to enroll. Immigrant students are required to have a physical and, at minimum, a TB blood test prior to entering school. Many times children arrive lacking many vaccinations, some even arrive with no medical documentation at all and must start the vaccination schedule anew. A physical alone is \$100, and each shot is an additional \$20, and that is at the cheapest clinics that offer sliding scale payment options. Without insurance, families are waiting until they find work and earn enough, or are depending on social services to cover the cost. This delays a child's ability to enter school at a time when they need structure and instruction more than their peers. Access to HUSKY would mean that these children can get quick appointments and start school within days of arrival as opposed to weeks.

Getting students into school is one battle, but then another arises. Student illness and poor dental care create distractions and undue absences when students can't afford proper care. Ailments that are easily treated are often ignored and children suffer. Absences rack up and they miss the instruction they need. If students do come to school feeling miserable, they are not able to focus and are not accessing the instruction. New immigrants who are often behind educationally and have to learn a new language can not afford to miss school for treatable illness!

One of the biggest issues that immigrant teens face is depression. The mental health of undocumented immigrants has been a growing concern in our town, especially with teens. These children did not choose their own adventures. Parents or other adults made the decision, and often did not tell their children until the day before they left. Their journeys were long and stressful. They tell of boats, deserts, immigration "prison," being hungry for days, watching their parents cry and nearly give up. These children miss friends, family, pets, and the childhoods they left behind. They are now watching their parents struggle to meet daily needs, and are often caring for younger siblings while their parents work multiple jobs. The school system can not provide sufficient mental health services for students with this level of stress and trauma, and they are not able to afford private care. I've seen teens hospitalized for depression, eating disorders, and suicide attempts. I've seen dropouts, pregnancies and arrests that may have been avoided if these students had access to mental health services. NO ONE, not even undocumented immigrants, should have to choose between food and attending to the mental health of their child.

Please do what is necessary to assure that all children, regardless of immigration status, have timely access to proper dental, medical and mental health services. Children should not have to suffer in CT. Healthy students are an asset to our schools and communities! I urge this committee to support HB 6616 and pass this legislation.

Thank you for your time,

Chalise Ross